

Using Games to Promote Students' English Grammar Skills

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Abstract

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, explicit teaching of grammar is valuable since grammar is often at the heart of language lessons. Furthermore, using games in teaching English (grammar) is frequently considered one of the effective ways in teaching a language. Thus, the aim of the present study is to explore the advantages of playing games (correction game and board game) in teaching English grammar. The participants of the study were 120 airline business students of Kasem Bundit University, Thailand. The results reveal the scores of pre and post grammar tests, which indicate the advantageous effect of teaching grammar through games. In addition, the students' viewpoints toward English studying and the games used in teaching English grammar were examined as well.

Keywords: teaching English, grammar skills, using games

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Introduction

English Grammar tenses, such as the present simple, the present progressive, and the past simple, are the most commonly used in the English speakers' world. Instruction in many levels of foreign language teaching is used explicitly in the teaching of grammar tenses and structures of a language, in view of the assumption that such teaching will be of benefit to students. And yet their usage seems to be difficult to many learners of English since it is well known that many foreign language learners have trouble using English grammar tenses. Part of the difficulty can be that the tenses system does not exist in the learners' mother tongue, like Thai. Such difficulty can pose challenges and be perceived as scary and complicated by learners (Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof, 2012). However, studies of English teaching grammar have suggested that using a game or games in teaching grammar can encourage students to master grammar rules (Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof, 2012; Kourilová, 2015).

In the teaching of language, games can be used at all levels of the learners. 'The exploitation of games in learning a language can be tracked to the 17th century' (Klimova, 2015, p.1157). According to Hadfield (1984, p. 4), 'a game is an activity with rules, a goal and element of fun.' She divided games into two kinds; the first one is competitive games. In these kinds of games, players or teams need to race to be the first ones reaching the goal. The second one is cooperative games. Players or teams of the games need to work together to reach a common goal. Likewise, Lewis and Bedson (1999, pp. 5-6) gave a similar definition. In their view, games must have a visible set of rules; they can be competitive or cooperative, as well as having to be fun and task based. In teaching a language, we can divide games into two types: communicative games and grammar games (or linguistic games). Grammar games can be raced either as a competitive or cooperative game, and their purpose is mainly on accuracy or producing a correct structure (Hadfield, 1984). In the present study,

the cooperative grammar games were mainly focused on.

The present paper is based on Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof's work (2012). This study is carried out because of students' confusion of the variety in forms and usage of tenses. Namely, they have studied English tenses, and yet they still have difficulties applying tenses when they speak, write, or even do English exercises. Therefore, the aims of the study are to investigate the effects of grammar tenses (present simple tense, present progressive tense, and past simple tense) taught by the use of a textbook along with the exploitation of a board game and a correction game compared with the use of a textbook alone, including students' viewpoints toward English studying and those games used in grammar teaching.

Literature review

Studies of using games in teaching a language have been carried out in several dimensions: promoting communicative ability, improving grammar skills, and learning vocabulary. The study of using games to improve

students' communicative ability (Zhu, 2012) suggested that teaching and learning English by means of language games is more effective and efficient in improving students' communicative ability than those by means of traditional methods. Zhu pointed out that using games (such as guessing games, picture games, and mime) in English classes is easily accepted by students; it also makes the classroom atmosphere relaxed and enjoyable to learn the language. Games can promote the practice of all basic language skills: speaking, listening, reading, writing, as well as increasing students' motivation to learn English.

Similarly, Rustick (2007) suggested using open-ended games (no single correct answers) in writing classes. According to the study, students should experience pleasure from playing with games, like crossword puzzles or punsters to help them build writing skills. However, there should be general principles to serve as the basis for all the games. Such principles require students to make deliberate but not explicitly rule-governed choices about language.

Rustick believes that students will develop their knowledge in writing as they play the games.

The studies of learning English vocabulary by means of games are also one of the areas of interest by researchers. McGraw, Yoshimoto and Seneff (2009) [8]’s study focused on an interactive card game in teaching foreign languages’ vocabulary. They conducted the game via the internet which had two modes: speaking and listening mode. The speaking mode was a simple picture matching task. Players needed to utter commands in the foreign language so that the computer would place pictures into appropriate locations in the browser. Contrastingly, the listening mode was the reverse activity; namely, the computer was the one which said commands in the foreign language, and the students were the ones who followed those commands. The finding of the study showed that the card game was interesting and valuable in terms of the enjoyment of the students. Moreover, students improved their speaking and listening skills on all measures of learning gains.

The exploitation of games in teaching grammar tenses was found in Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof’s work (2012). They used a board game as a supplement to textbooks in teaching grammar tenses. The results of their study showed that a board game was a useful teaching tool. After playing the game, students got better outcomes (when comparing their pre and post test scores). By using a board game, students were motivated to study because they believed the game was interesting and useful.

Methodology

1 Population

The population for this study consisted of 120 airline business students of KBU who enrolled in four sections of Vocabulary in Airline Business and TOEIC Preparation Beginner II course. The students were divided into two groups in order to serve the objectives of the study: control group (59 students: section 1 and 2) and experimental group (61 students: section 3 and 4).

2 Research Instruments

Three questionnaires (questionnaire 1, questionnaire 2.1, and questionnaire 2.2) and pre and post grammar tests were designed for collecting data from the students. Questionnaire 1 concerning personal details and viewpoints toward English studying was given to students in both control and experimental groups while questionnaires 2.1 and 2.2 regarding feedback on the grammar treatments were given out to students in the experimental group.

As for the pre and post grammar tests, both of the tests were similar. They consisted of 30 cloze texts with multiple choices and 15 error identifications of sentences with incorrect verb tenses (the present simple, the present progressive, and the past simple). However, questions in pre and post test were presented in a different random order for each round of testing.

3 Data Collection and Analysis

A week before the grammar treatments started, the researchers collected questionnaire 1 data from

both control and experimental groups, and all students from both groups were instructed to do the grammar pre-test. The grammar treatments were weekly three-hour sessions in a classroom setting for three weeks. The control group received treatment which consisted of studying verb tenses (the present simple, the present progressive, and the past simple) only from a textbook. In contrast, the experimental group not only received the same grammar treatment as the control group but also received the treatments by playing board games and correction games as a supplement. Each week, the games were picked up to play in a classroom randomly.

For the experimental group, the treatment session started with teaching grammar tenses according to the textbook for two hours followed by the supplementary activity for one hour. The board game was used in the first week, and the correction game was used in the rest of the two weeks. In addition, all activities were led by the classroom teacher.

In the first week, the board game started with the teacher providing rules of the game to the students. The students in each class, then, were divided randomly into three teams (Team1, Team2, and Team3); each team contained 10-11 players. Further, the class was provided only one board game presented on the classroom board and consisted of sentences concerning the present simple. The rules of the game were that Team1 started the game by rolling a dice then moved forward according to the number on a dice. During their turns, Team1 had to make the sentence that their dice landed on positive and negative by saying the correct form of sentences; for example, 'She (watch) ____ soap opera every day' and 'You (eat) ____ cooked snails' needed to transform into grammatical forms, namely, 'She watches soap opera,' 'She doesn't watch soap opera,' 'You eat cooked snails,' and 'You don't eat cooked snails.' If Team1 said the sentences correctly, they could stay at the slot they landed; if not, the team needed to move back to where they were. The same rules applied to Team2

and Team3 respectively. In addition, two or more teams could be on the same space. Each team continued playing the game until all teams reached the end of the board game. The team that first reached the end was the winner.

This treatment session was designed to let the students practice the patterns of grammatical sentences regarding the present simple. They were aroused to use the language and tried to figure out the correct grammatical structure at the same time.

Another supplementary treatment in the study was a correction game which the researchers adapted from Vallera (2013). To play a game, students in the classroom were divided into three teams: Team1, Team2, and Team3. Students were selected to join each team randomly. Further, the classroom teacher wrote 12 ungrammatical sentences with regard to a tense which students had studied on the board; namely, the present progressive was taught in the second week and the past simple was taught in the third week. The teacher, then, told the class that each sentence contained a mistake, and

players in all teams were told to read the sentences and look for the mistakes as the teacher was writing on the board. Each team was given 100 points printed in cards. Team1 started the game by choosing a sentence for Team2 to correct. Team2, then, had to decide how many points they would like to gamble. The maximum bet was 50 points for each team. Team2 had to discuss what the correct form of the sentence was and wrote it on the board within 2 minutes. If Team2 could identify and correct the mistake in the given time, the teacher, then, gave them the same points that they gambled to be added to their total. Team2, however, lost the points if they could not identify the mistake. In addition, if Team2 gave the wrong correction of the chosen sentence, the other teams (Team1 and Team3) got a chance to get the points that Team 2 bet if the team answered correctly.

By means of the game, students in all teams had to consult at the same time as the other team was playing. Therefore, all students were encouraged to focus on the sentences. The more

confident they were, the more points they would gamble.

A week after the grammatical treatment, students from both control and experimental groups were instructed to do the post-test for one hour during their Vocabulary in Airline Business and TOEIC Preparation Beginner II class. The questionnaires 2.1 and 2.2 were given to students in the experimental group to collect their feedback on the board game and correction game that were used as a supplement to the textbook. All of the data collected from questionnaire 1 and questionnaires 2.1 and 2.2 were presented in the descriptive statistics (percentage), and the pre-test and post-test results were analyzed by the SPSS Statistics software.

Results

1. General information of the students from both control group and experimental group in relation to personal details and viewpoints toward English studying

From all 120 respondents in the study, 28% of them was male, and 72% was female. Of all respondents, only 7%

of the respondents stated that they were proficient in English while 52% was neutral on the statement, and 41% of the respondents stated that they were not proficient in English. An average of 53% of the respondents liked to study English, and 43% of the respondents remained neutral on this statement. There was only 9% of the respondents who used English regularly while 57% seldom used English in their daily life, and 34% remained neutral. Although 78% of the respondents agreed that studying grammar is salient, only 8% liked learning grammar; 53% of them felt neutral about studying grammar. Furthermore, 44% of the respondents agreed that grammar rules were difficult to understand, and 48% was neutral on this statement. 53% of the respondents agreed that they had trouble remembering grammar rules whereas 42% remained neutral on the statement.

2. Students' viewpoints of experimental group on the given grammar treatments

The treatments that supplemented the textbook in the study were using a board game and a correction game. The

result showed that 87% and 39% of the experimental group population used to the play board game and the correction game, respectively. Besides, 87% and 80% of the respondents preferred playing the board game and the correction game as a supplement activity in a classroom to studying only on a textbook, respectively. Further, 84% of the respondents who answered questionnaire 2.1 and 85% of those who answered questionnaire 2.2 stated that the board game and the correction game were fun. Most importantly, 90% of those who answered questionnaire 2.1 and questionnaire 2.2 believed that the board game and the correction game were useful games to enhance their grammar skills.

These results signify that using games in teaching grammar lessons enhance positive classroom atmosphere and students' willingness to learn a language (Zhu, 2012; Rustick, 2007; McGraw et al., 2009; Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof, 2012).

3. Pre and Post tests results

Results were analyzed mean scores of the pre and post treatment tests by using the SPSS Statistics software. The control group's mean scores on grammatical pre and post test were compared with the experimental group's mean scores.

As can be seen in table 1 and table 2, the experimental group's grammar mean scores of the pre test (23.79) were higher than the control group's (22.34). There was, however, no significant difference between the two

groups ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, mean scores (28.74) of the experimental group were significantly different from the control group's mean scores (24.79) ($p < 0.05$). Thus, post treatment testing indicated a significant improvement in test scores for the experimental group. These results supported the prior studies, at least, of Shima Tengku Paris & Yussof (2012) and McGraw et al. (2009) that games were valuable in terms of improving students' English skills.

Table 1. Mean scores of pre-test and post-test

Group		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre Test	Control	22.347	59	5.1043	.6645
	Experimental	23.797	61	7.6514	.9961
Post Test	Control	24.797	59	8.2588	1.0752
	Experimental	28.746	61	7.6718	.9988

Table 2. Pair sample test on mean scores of control and experimental groups

Group	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)			
	Mean	S.D.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference								
				Mean	Lower	Upper						
Pre Test Control												
	-1.4492	7.5422	.9819	-3.4147	.5164	-1.476	58	.145				
Experimental												
Post Test Control												
	11.336	1.475										
Experimental	-3.9492	4	9	-6.9034	-.9949	-2.676	58	.010				
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Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to measure the effectiveness of grammatical treatments concerning tenses in a classroom setting by using a board game and a correction game. The mean scores of the pre and post treatment of the control group and the experimental group were compared. It was found that the experimental group made significantly more progress over the treatment period than the control

group. Thus, the exploitation of these games is useful in teaching English grammar. However, it is important to note that the grammatical treatment delivered positive results across most students in the experimental group. Some students did not show improvement on the post test. There are several factors that are worthy of mention here: 1) background knowledge of the students on the particular tenses, 2) student's participation during the

game period, and 3) students' motivation on studying English. When they lack (one of) these factors, it seems to the teacher that it is quite hard for them to master English grammar.

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